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SUBJECT: EMBASSY DOHA'S ANALYSIS OF QATARI PRIME MINISTER'S
AL JAZEERA INTERVIEW

REF: A. DOHA 421
[B](#). DOHA 362
[C](#). DOHA 225
[D](#). DOHA 96
[E](#). DOHA 422

(C) KEY ANALYTIC POINTS AND COMMENTS

-- In a rare, 50-minute interview on June 24 on Al Jazeera's Arabic news service, Qatar's Prime Minister, Hamad Bin Jassim Al Thani, repeatedly described the United States as a "friend." He called U.S.-Qatari relations "strategic."

-- For a small state normally cautious about aligning too closely with any other country, such a public statement designed to reach throughout the Arab world is bold. It is another indication of Qatar's strong interest in upgrading the bilateral political relationship with the United States.

-- That said, the Prime Minister's repeated emphasis in the interview on Qatar's right to its own opinion is not only a reaffirmation of Qatar's foreign policy approach to the region. It is also a signal that Qatar intends to maintain and pursue state and non-state relationships that others such as the United States oppose, such as with Hamas, Hizballah, and Iran.

-- Qatar's mediation efforts throughout the Middle East and North Africa featured prominently in the Prime Minister's remarks. These efforts reflect a small and vulnerable country's acute dependence on regional stability as much as they do an ideological stance or religious impulse.

-- But the Prime Minister spent the most time on Egypt. He strongly criticized (unnamed) elements in the Egyptian government. But, significantly, he did not criticize its President. He set ambiguous terms for re-opening the Israeli trade office.

-- Despite GOQ protestations to the contrary, Al Jazeera remains one of Qatar's most valuable political and diplomatic tools.

COMMENT

-- Prime Minister Al Thani's outreach to the United States is a response to President Obama's energetic efforts to repair the U.S. relationship with the Arab and Muslim worlds. The U.S. Administration's newfound credibility in the Middle East, bolstered by a tough stand with the Israelis over settlements, has made the U.S. a more attractive partner for Qatar and other Arab countries.

-- Beyond the President's historic speech in Cairo, other reasons exist for the Prime Minister's remarks about the United States in the interview. These include Acting NEA

Assistant Secretary Feltman's recent successful visit to Qatar and the also recent and successful visits to Washington by Qatar's head of state security and Attorney General. U.S. Special Envoy for Sudan Scott Gration's close working relationship with the GOQ on Qatar's initiative on Darfur has likewise contributed. As also did the reclassification of Qatar to the Tier 2 Watch List for Trafficking in Persons.

End Key Points and Comment.

¶1. (U) Further to Ref A, Embassy Doha offers the following analysis and reporting on the Prime Minister's rare and important interview on Al Jazeera about Qatar's foreign policy in the region. The subjects covered in the interview, if not the questions themselves, almost certainly were worked out in advance. Thus the interview should be interpreted as a carefully-considered move by Qatar to explain to the Arab world and key members of the international community Qatar's regional political and diplomatic policies.

U.S.-QATAR RELATIONS

¶2. (C) Qatari Prime Minister (and Foreign Minister) Hamad Bin Jassim Al Thani's June 24 interview on Al Jazeera Arabic television network broached many of the country's most controversial and active regional foreign policies. The interview took place on "Bila Hodood" (Without Borders), one of Al Jazeera's flagship programs, which covers political and social issues in the confrontational style of its Egyptian

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host, Ahmed Mansour.

¶3. (C) The Prime Minister discussed Qatar's "strategic" relationship with the U.S. with surprising candor and explicitness, although his comments about the U.S. - Qatari bilateral relationship occupied a relatively small part of the program, and they occurred towards the middle of the interview. Repeatedly referring to the U.S. as a "friend" of Qatar, he expressed satisfaction with President Obama's concerted effort to reach out to the Muslim world.

¶4. (C) Pointing to the U.S. administration's campaign to halt Israeli settlement construction and resume Middle East peace negotiations, the PM remarked that he has "great hope" in the new administration. Notably, he asserted that Qatar will help the United States to the greatest extent possible if it is serious about resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Prime Minister also expressed satisfaction that the political dialogue and climate between his country and the United States have recently improved.

¶5. (C) These remarks by the Prime Minister about the United States represent fulsome praise for Qatar, a country that historically has publicly downplayed its relations with the United States and the American presence in Qatar. While it hosts Al Udaid Air Base, one of the largest and most important military facilities in the Middle East, Qatar's desire to avoid the appearance of being a western outpost has led the GOQ to minimize the visibility of its security dependence on the U.S. In this context, the Prime Minister's frank admission of a "strategic" relationship with the United States is significant.

¶6. (C) After several years of strained relations, the Prime Minister's comments are encouraging public sign that Qatar is eager to mend political fences with the United States -- although not without an important caveat (see para. 7, immediately below.) An upgraded political relationship with Qatar could manifest itself in increased cooperation on several fronts, from counter-terrorism and Middle East peace to Iraq and Afghanistan, as highlighted in Ref B.

Relations with Extremists

¶17. (C) However, the Prime Minister remarked several times in the interview that Qatar remains entitled to its own opinion on regional and international issues, saying "(we) have our own viewpoints, which no one can confiscate (read: dictate)."

The Prime Minister was adamant: Qatar has the right to speak out and the right to pursue an independent policy line. The subtext of this is that Qatar, despite its stated strategic alliance with the United States, despite its membership in the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League, will not abandon its independence of thought and action. To Embassy Doha, the Prime Minister was signaling here Qatar's -- the Amir's -- firm intention to maintain its engagement with, and active support for, non-state actors such as Hamas and Hizbollah regardless of international pressure.

¶18. (C) That said, there was a complete absence of any explicit mention of Hamas, Syria, or Hizbollah. Avoiding these fault lines is consistent with the apparent intention of the Prime Minister to reach out to the United States in the interview, and to telegraph that intent quite publicly to the Arab world and others. Because Qatar is unlikely to abandon ties with these parties, mentioning these relationships in the interview would only emphasize obstacles in the way of improved U.S.-Qatari relations. Hamad bin Jassim probably deliberately chose instead to speak in very general terms about regional peace and stability.

¶19. (C) In a similar vein, Prime Minister Al Thani's brief mention of Iran was characteristically muted and probably calculated to avoid any appearance of Qatari bias vis--vis the current protests.

-- (U) The Premier reiterated the Amir's position, stated publicly on a state visit to Paris on June 23, that Iran's stability is important for the Gulf region and expressed confidence that Iran will "bypass" the crisis.

QATAR'S MEDIATION PHILOSOPHY

¶10. (C) Taken as a whole, the Prime Minister's comments reaffirm Qatar that has strategically chosen to present itself as a valuable regional mediator, a role in which small size is not necessarily a disadvantage. Such a role is also in Qatar's acute self-interest. Tiny Qatar is acutely

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vulnerable to disruptions in the region; instability and chaos greatly increase the possibility that its sovereignty could be violated or its economic security undermined by its two neighbors with hegemonic aspirations, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

¶11. (C) The major exception to this regional approach is Qatar's policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During the Gaza war, Qatar acted in a way that inflamed, rather than tempered, regional tensions. Recognizing the damage that this approach caused at the start of the Obama Administration, and in Qatar's relations with other Arab states, Qatar's leaders set out to rehabilitate their moderate image during the Arab League summit in Doha in March 2009 (Ref C).

¶12. (C) The Prime Minister's interview continued this effort. The Prime Minister framed Qatar's Gaza involvement in terms of Palestinian suffering. He chose not to justify Qatar's actions in Gaza as promoting regional stability, a justification he used when discussing other regional disputes.

¶13. (C) On Israel, the Prime Minister said Qatar would re-open the Israeli trade office once the conditions that led to this action were undone and Israel made efforts to improve the plight of the Palestinians. (The office has been closed since January, in the aftermath of the Gaza War.) With such an ambiguous threshold for upgrading relations, Qatar appears in no rush to restore ties with Israel, although contacts between the two continue.

-- (U) The Prime Minister denied that Qatar sought to play on the emotions of the Arab world when it closed the Israeli trade office. Exasperated, he remarked that Qatar's Arab brothers wanted the office closed when it was open, but they want it open now that it is closed. He did not elaborate.

RELATIONS WITH EGYPT

¶14. (C) Knowing the clamor Qatar has caused in the region, the Prime Minister addressed head-on Qatar's diplomatic tensions with Egypt, which began with differences over Israel's actions in Gaza earlier this year and quickly degenerated into a media war between the two sides.

-- (U) Egyptian charges have recently included accusations that Qatar helped plan Hamas' takeover of Gaza in the summer of 2007 and Qatari complicity in Hizbollah's alleged plot to stage attacks in Egypt.

-- (U) Qatari efforts to mediate conflicts in Sudan have come under attack by the Egyptians, who argue that Qatar is interfering in Egypt's sphere of influence.

-- (U) Responding to Egyptian allegations of interference, the Prime Minister denied in the interview that Qatar worked (unsuccessfully) with the French to buy the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit from his captors. He asserted that Qatar was just responding to a request for assistance from a friendly, non-Arab state. He maintained that Qatar entered the negotiations only on the condition that the terms of Egypt's mediation were upheld.

¶15. (C) The Prime Minister suggested that Egyptian accusations were attempts by unspecified elements in Egypt to distract the public from that government's domestic failures. Dismissing Egyptian accusations as "ridiculous," he made no visible attempt to reconcile with the Egyptians, beyond an obligatory commitment to Arab Unity. The Prime Minister continued with the practice of blaming unspecified elements within the Egyptian regime for the rift, while expressing admiration for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak -- no doubt to show an Arab leader respect and avoid the appearance of a personality-driven feud. Contrary to all evidence, Hamad bin Jassim denied that Qatar had tried to host a Gaza reconstruction conference in Doha after the Gaza war began to compete with one being held in Egypt (see Ref D). Knowing that Egypt's role in advancing peace is important to the United States, the Prime Minister was likely also addressing his comments to an audience broader than officials in Cairo.

¶16. (U) Demonstrating Qatar's indifference to current tensions, the Premier said the dispute would be resolved, but he did not know whether it would take one day or ten years.

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-- (U) The Prime Minister said that he had a meeting with Umar Sulayman, head of Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate, which was mediated by Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al Faysal. While they "spoke on everything," they did not agree on everything, he said.

RECONCILIATION WITH SAUDI ARABIA

¶17. (C) The lengths to which Prime Minister Al Thani praised Saudi Arabia in the interview merit further attention. They reflect Qatar's calculation that it took tensions with other Arab countries too far during the Gaza war, endangering its strategy of maximizing its influence by preserving good relations with all countries. At a time when Qatar does not appear eager (and possibly able) to reconcile with Egypt, Qatar probably believes it cannot afford to alienate the other Arab powerhouse.

-- (C) The Prime Minister recognized that Saudi Arabia had played a role in getting some Arab states to skip Qatar's emergency summit on the Gaza war. But he argued forcefully that differences with Saudi Arabia were confined to discrete points of view, a reference, we think, to Iran, Hamas, and the appropriate role of Al Jazeera in the region.

-- (U) The Prime Minister pointed to the two country's resolution of the Khor Al Udaid maritime border dispute as evidence of improving ties. He also used conspicuously warm words to describe Saudi Arabia's contributions, calling Saudi Arabia an important country and "the backbone of the GCC."

THE DOHA AGREEMENT ON LEBANON

¶18. (C) In a positive sign for U.S. interests in Lebanon, the Prime Minister indicated that Qatar would not insist that the 2007 Doha Agreement remain operative, echoing comments he made in private to A/S Feltman (see Ref E).

-- (U) Commenting on Lebanese Prime-Minister designate Saad Hariri's statement that the Doha Agreement is at an end with the completion of the recent elections in Lebanon, the Prime Minister remarked that the agreement was just for a "certain phase."

YEMEN

¶19. (C) The Prime Minister, when discussing Qatar's role in trying to mediate the Al-Huthi rebellion in Yemen, dismissed Yemeni government accusations that Qatar funded the rebellion. The Prime Minister maintained that his country was a "fair broker" that helped forge an agreement that was not honored for no fault of its own. In response to calls from some in Yemen and the region for Qatar to reprise its mediation role, the Prime Minister indicated Qatar's reluctance by noting that he would advise the Amir not to continue Qatar's involvement in Yemen. The Prime Minister likely also calculated that bringing the issue into the open would increase pressure on the Yemeni Government to return to Qatar-led mediation.

AL JAZEERA'S ROLE IN QATARI FOREIGN POLICY

¶20. (U) The Prime Minister broached the subject of Al Jazeera and the "headaches" it has caused for the Government of Qatar, from tensions with Saudi Arabia to contributing to the current rift with Egypt.

-- (U) Asked about Al Jazeera, he joked that Qatar should sell it, indicating Qatar was offered \$5 billion for it at one time. He added that the money might be worth more than the headaches Al Jazeera has caused for the regime.

¶21. (C) Such statements must not be taken at face value as Al Jazeera, the most watched satellite television station in the Middle East, is heavily subsidized by the Qatari government and has proved itself a useful tool for the station's

political masters. The station's coverage of events in the Middle East is relatively free and open, though it refrains from criticizing Qatar and its government. Al Jazeera's ability to influence public opinion throughout the region is a substantial source of leverage for Qatar, one which it is unlikely to relinquish. Moreover, the network can also be used as a chip to improve relations. For example, Al Jazeera's more favorable coverage of Saudi Arabia's royal

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family has facilitated Qatari-Saudi reconciliation over the past year.

LeBaron